

HE SPENT HIS TOUR OF DUTY  
bombing German cities  
and made it home only to  
discover he could never  
leave the war behind him.  
Then, a lifetime later, he  
found a way to make peace.

# THE 36TH MISSION

BY FRANK CLARK

MY STORY BEGINS IN 1925. I WAS THE YOUNGEST of nine children born to Frank and Leata Clark, factory workers in southern Wisconsin who were hit hard by the Depression. My father died when I was thirteen. In October 1943, as soon as I turned eighteen, I enlisted in the Army as a private, hoping to become a fighter pilot.

I soon found out that the Army Air Corps already had plenty of fighter pilots. I would have to choose among the paratroops, the infantry, and aerial gunnery. The prospect of jumping out of an airplane for any reason ranked as low with me as walking through the mud of the world as an infantryman. I made my choice.

I went to gunnery school in Las Vegas, Nevada, and after what seemed a short time, the crew I trained with was assigned an air-

**B-17s aloft on a mission. This picture—  
and every other illustration in this story  
—is from Frank Clark's collection.**









plane. We picked up our B-17 bomber at Hunter Field, Georgia; proceeded to Bangor, Maine, then to Goose Bay, Labrador, and on to Valley, Wales, in the British Isles; and then joined the 8th Air Force, 379th Bombardment Group, 524th Squadron at Kimbolton, England.

The B-17 was built to fly high and fast and required ten crew members: two pilots, a bombardier/nose gunner, a navigator/nose gunner, a radio operator/gunner, a flight engineer/upper-turret gunner, a ball-turret gunner, two waist gunners, and a tail gunner.

From my diary: "October 5, 1944. Well, today was our first mission. We were all plenty scared and exhausted until we got into the air. Our target was the big Henry Ford plant at Cologne, Germany. We couldn't see the results of our bombing because of cloud cover. The flak was really heavy and very accurate. We had thirteen holes in the wings and fuselage when we got back. The bombardier was hit by a piece of flak, but because he was wearing a flak suit, he was just knocked to the floor."

I was in the ball turret, the revolving upside-down dome underneath the plane. It was operated by hydraulics but could be cranked up by hand by someone in the plane if hydraulic pressure was lost. One requirement of a ball-turret gunner was that he should be small. And although I was small, a flak suit or a parachute wouldn't fit inside the turret along with me, so I had to take my chances. But mine was not the worst position on the ship, and it didn't bother me at the time. Actually there weren't any very good positions on the plane. War does not discriminate. We were just like the people on the ground when the bombs dropped.

A mission began with a briefing session. We were told where the target was, whether we could expect enemy fighters, and how many flak guns there were around the target area. Most of the time during the briefing we won-

dered: Will I survive? Will the plane blow up? What happens if this happens? What happens if that happens? Will this be the end? Although the crew was a unit, a team, its members talked to themselves so no one else could hear that they were afraid. Fear isolated each of us.

When we were finally airborne, a sigh of relief ran through the crew. The critical part of the journey was over once the plane struggled off the ground with its full load of gas and bombs. Anything could happen during takeoff.

The view was fantastic as we circled over England, waiting to join a fighter squadron; they say fliers were the

**M**OST OF THE TIME DURING the briefing we wondered: Will I survive? Fear isolated each of us.

only people who could see the sun over England. By the time twenty-four planes formed into a squadron and headed for the target, ages had already seemed to pass.

As the German target drew near, we first saw only a few puffs of black smoke, then more and more, the close ones jarring the plane. I would sit sweating even though the temperature outside my heated suit was twenty or more degrees below zero.

Finally we reached the target and dropped the bombs. Another sigh of relief, but the danger was far from over. The only welcome sight of the mission was the white cliffs of Dover as we passed over the coast of England on our way back to Kimbolton. Once the plane touched down, our hearts finally slowed with the slowing of the engines.

On the ground we had time to talk, time to think, and time to wonder what would happen next. We didn't talk much in the air, at least not to

anyone, just at them, on the intercom, only when necessary. Now that we had time for conversations and could hear one another, we couldn't think of anything to say. No one wanted to look or act stupid, although I knew I did anyway. I wondered if everyone felt that way.

Now we could take time to preen ourselves: shower, shave, comb our hair, and get our clothes ready for a possible pass to town.

Our first-time out on a pass no one wanted to go alone because we were shy and felt there was safety in numbers. Naturally the first place we all headed was a pub, and we were welcomed. Going to town was fun, though



**Clark just after he turned eighteen.**

we also felt sad and lonely and disoriented so far from home, knowing only other soldiers. But the English were hospitable and tried hard to make us feel comfortable.

English girls were sociable and friendly, but they let us know where we were. Their companionship was enough for most of us; our average age was twenty, and we had serious business to attend to the next day. We were not men but boys, away from home and desperate for anything away from the military and thoughts of tomorrow. That first night out we got drunk and closed the pub.

#### **October 11, 1944—Koblenz**

We woke up at 3:00 A.M. with the taste of cotton in our mouths. At the briefing, as we sat there full of foreboding and loaded down with equipment as well as hangovers, the words just came and went and bounced off the walls. All I caught was that we



were going to a town called Wesseling where the Germans had a synthetic oil refinery that was heavily protected by antiaircraft guns. There was also a very good chance that we would encounter fighters.

From my diary: "We had just got back from a forty-eight-hour pass and had a swell time. Saw some of England from the ground instead of from the sky. We were supposed to bomb the city of Wesseling, but because of visibility took the secondary target of Koblenz. It turned out to be a better target because of the flak guns and no fighters. We hit a marshaling yard outside the city, and the results were good because the run was visual—no clouds. I forgot to mention that while we were on pass, a couple of flying bombs, V-2s, came down around the town and did quite a bit of damage. But not as much as we did to the Germans today."

#### **October 15, 1944—Cologne**

From my diary: "We hit the marshaling yards and a synthetic oil refinery instead of the Henry Ford plant. We bombed visually, and the results were excellent. Flak was moderate to heavy and pretty accurate. No fighters came up to greet us, only our own, and we were plenty glad to see them. Not so scared today. I guess the biggest thing we're afraid of is the ship blowing up, as quite a few of them have been doing."

#### **October 17, 1944—Cologne**

From my diary: "Today is my birthday—just turned 19. We went to Cologne again. We sure are giving it a lot of bombing. . . ."

"My turret got hit with a piece of flak. The double glass is the only thing that kept it from hitting me. The glass shattered but didn't break through. Lucky for me, but I was helpless to defend the ship because I couldn't see out of it. When I reported this to the pilot, he told me to maintain the position as best I could, which I did. Boy, was I happy to hit the ground."

#### **October 18, 1944—Cologne**

From my diary: "Same place—Cologne. We finally hit the Henry Ford factory and were quite sure we did a good job this time. The same old flak thick as ever. I don't even count the holes in the ship any more."

#### **October 22, 1944—Brunswick**

From my diary: "We went to a new place today, Brunswick. Lots of flak, but we managed to get through to the target O.K. We bombed a motor plant. Later we found out it was an aircraft factory. We had to bomb by instrument, so we couldn't see the results."

#### **October 25, 1944—Geilenkirchen**

From my diary: "Flying pretty often now. Sometimes every day, sometimes every few days, but they all count to get closer to home. We sometimes have to abort missions, and these I never keep track of because they do not count them."

"This was an oil refinery, and I hope we hit it. It will help to keep the fighters on the ground. Seven missions and I haven't had to fire a shot. At least not at an enemy, only to test-fire the guns. I'd sure like to finish just like that—no guns."

#### **October 26, 1944—Münster**

From my diary: "A secondary target, a railway yard. The flak was pretty heavy, but it wasn't very accurate. Just a few holes and no fighter opposition as yet."

#### **November 1, 1944—Geilenkirchen**

From my diary: "Another blind run, and we couldn't tell if we hit it. Plenty of flak again. When we got back, we found a lot of men had been injured."

#### **November 2, 1944—Rheine**

From my diary: "It was a good target—visual. It was a factory, and we did a good job on it. Boy, it seems like these first ten missions went fast. Hope the rest go just as fast. Well, we finally got a pass to go to London, and it's about time."

I really enjoyed London, but the

time on our passes was soon up, and we had to return to the base. We had witnessed the terrible bombing the Germans had inflicted on London and were glad we were returning it. We were grateful that at least the United States was out of their reach.

After looking forward to getting some mail for so long, I now wished I hadn't gotten any. My sister wrote and told me that the girl I had been going out with back home had been seen dating a man twice her age and six feet tall. He had a glass eye from a motorcycle accident.

I had been writing my girl constantly and sending her presents, but she couldn't wait for me. I wrote her one last time and got a letter in response. She admitted that she had gotten married, but still wanted to be friends.

We didn't fly the rest of November and all of December, and I didn't care about anything any more. I was drunk every night because of the weather, my ex-girl friend, and having to spend my first Christmas away from home. I also had the feeling I would never make it back.

#### **January 15, 1945—Ingolstadt**

From my diary: "We went to Ingolstadt today, a new target. It had never been bombed before. It was a long flight—eight hours and twenty minutes. But it was a pretty good run. No flak. No fighters. We could see the Swiss Alps off in the distance. It was quite a bit like a sight-seeing tour."

For the first time I flew as bombardier with a new squadron, the 525th. My main job was as nose gunner and toggler, to open the bomb-bay doors and drop the bombs off the plane. If the bomb-bay doors failed to close after the bombs were dropped, I had to squeeze out onto the catwalk—less than ten inches wide—and hand-crank them shut. I had other duties as well: armament officer, oxygen officer, and first-aid dispenser. And because there was a shortage of navigators, bombardiers sometimes had to take over that job too. This would be my position for the rest of



my missions. I had twenty-four more to go.

#### **January 17, 1945—Paderborn**

From my diary: "We went to another new place today. I flew as nose gunner and toggled the bombs. The name of the target was Paderborn."

The name of the town was not important to me at the time, but it would return to haunt me. The mission was what we called a milk run: no flak, no fighters. The target was a railroad repair shop. It was completely clouded over. We couldn't tell whether we had hit the target or not. I was conscientious and didn't want to drop the bombs indiscriminately, but I did anyway.

My plane was one of 397 that took part in the bombing of Paderborn that day. Paderborn would be the target of seven attack waves, the last on March 28, 1945. In all, 1,154 tons of bombs were dropped on Paderborn, leaving it in ruins.

#### **January 20, 1945—Stuttgart**

From my diary: "Today was Number 13, and I sure sweated this one out. We went to a place called Mannheim, but we didn't drop our bombs. Plenty of flak but inaccurate. Then we went to a secondary target called Stuttgart. It was plenty rough there. I guess we did a pretty good job on the target.

#### **January 23, 1945—Neuss (marshaling yard)**

It was at this point that I stopped writing in my diary. Thoughts of doom were present every day. I felt terrible—gloomy day after gloomy day—flying like a machine and not really caring if I returned or not. All the days blended into one another.

During Mission 14 we sighted more enemy fighters than ever, and the continuous reports on the intercom were very disturbing to me. I was flying with a different crew, a green crew, and the pilot was constantly chattering nervously over the intercom. Over the target, as I was getting ready to

drop the bombs, I finally told him to shut up before we all got as rattled as he was and ended up jumping out over enemy territory.

After I had dropped the bombs, we were hit by fighters, but they must have been green too, from the way they attacked our formation. One German pilot came so close I could make out his face in the cockpit. I watched as my tracer shells went into his plane. He might just as well have committed suicide.

When we got back to the base, the pilot was in such a bad state that it took him three passes at the runway before he finally set the plane down. At the debriefing I told them what had

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happened and said I would rather shoot myself on the ground than fly with this pilot again. I never had to. I was put on another crew. That was one thing I didn't like: I was put on a different crew whenever they needed a toggler, and it was scary.

#### **February 9, 1945—Arnsberg**

We thought we had seen everything, but this mission nearly ended it for a lot of us. We were over the target and about ready to drop our bombs. Then we saw something we couldn't believe. Someone had gotten the directions wrong, and two squadrons were approaching the same target at different angles at the same time. The confusion was unbelievable.

How could something like this happen? Was someone in the lead plane drunk? Or had someone miscalculated? We never found out. In the confusion there soon was no formation; it was every plane for itself. I dropped my bombs as soon as I saw the first

B-17 heading toward us, and I didn't give a damn where they landed.

The flight back to England was one of the quietest times I've ever experienced; everyone was too petrified to speak. After our debriefing we went to the barracks and just lay in bed, some of us for hours. We didn't even talk to one another. The whole story never came out.

#### **February 20, 1945—Nuremberg**

On our way to Nuremberg we no longer cared about anything. We lost planes that day from flak, fighters, plain bad luck with engines; anything that could go wrong went wrong. We felt empty and numb and just want-

ed to get the bombing over with.

"Don't get the notion that your job is going to be glorious or glamorous," some colonel had told us. "You've got dirty work to do and might as well face the facts: You're going to be baby killers."

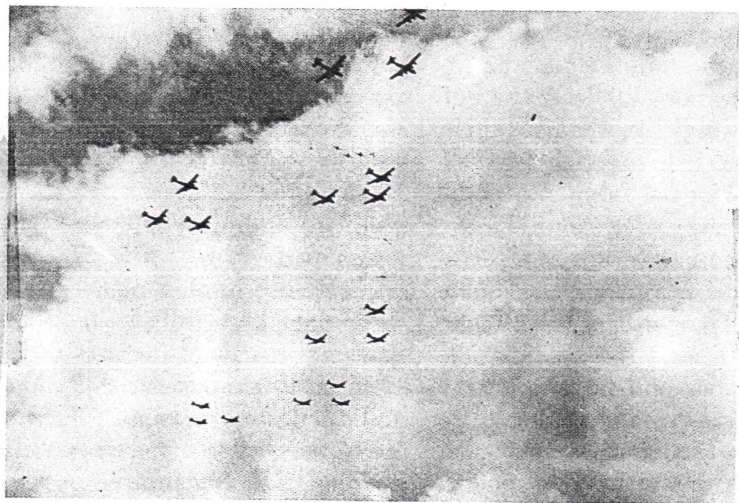
#### **March 7, 1945—Giessen**

Before we got within a hundred miles of the target, fighters came up, and we saw them hit other squadrons before they got to us. We knew what was coming. When we got close, I couldn't believe the target was a target at all. It appeared to be a great big woods surrounding an open field, but all kinds of roads led in and out. We had a good visual run, and we dropped our bombs. We were surprised when flames came up to greet us; we had hit an ammo or fuel dump.

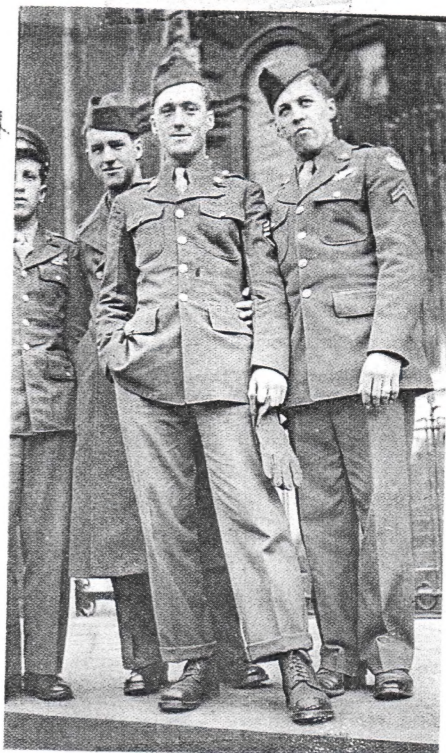
We had just dropped our bombs

**A page from  
Clark's album:  
he is in the center  
of the lower-left  
photo and at  
far left in the  
bottom-right one**





*Left to right: [illegible]*





when the pilot reported that an engine must have been hit; he would have to feather it. When a prop had to be feathered, it was turned sideways to cut down on drag and air resistance. The propeller was supposed to stop in this position, but sometimes it didn't. Then it would windmill, putting us at the mercy of the flow of air. If the plane turned while the prop was windmilling, the propeller could rotate so fast it would fly off from the engine and cause terrible damage.

We were lucky. The prop stayed on, but we were losing speed and altitude, and we dropped behind the squadron, a sitting duck to any fighters.

We threw everything out of the aircraft, and when we finished, the pilot revved up the engines. The extra load on one of the other engines proved too great, and an oil line burst. Now we had two engines out.

The pilot and navigator determined that the closest place to land would be Switzerland, but after calculating the amount of gas versus distance, they decided we could make it back to France.

The pilot told us to consider bailing out, described what he thought our chances were, and then asked us what we wanted to do. We appreciated his asking, and we trusted him, so we all decided to stay with the plane. It was the right choice. Our pilot had proved worthy of our trust. We were equals on the plane; the officers knew that their chances of survival depended on us and ours on them. It was an unspoken understanding.

#### **March 9, 1945—Kassel**

What I didn't like, and didn't really talk about to anyone, was the fact that we were bombing industrial towns that were largely populated with working people—much like the towns a lot of us came from.

Kassel was a large town, outside the Ruhr Valley but still important to the German war effort. I don't remember exactly what the target was, but there were many anti-aircraft guns. This usu-

ally told us the target was important.

I toggled the bombs, and the radio operator reported, "Bombs away!" But he was wrong. As we started back for the base, I discovered that two bombs had gotten hung up in the bomb bay when they should have dropped. The bomb on the top had loosened and was leaning on the bomb beneath it. The partially loose bomb had become armed.

I was terrified and went to tell the pilot, who immediately became terrified too. We tried to figure out what might happen and realized we couldn't land the plane this way. The pilot called the squadron and reported our predicament. We were advised to drop

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out of the formation; if we did blow up, at least we wouldn't take others with us.

We finally reached the Channel, and I opened the bomb-bay doors. The co-pilot and I went back and literally kicked the bombs until they finally released and fell harmlessly into the water.

#### **March 11, 1945—Bremen**

Before we even reached the target, the sky filled with the Germans' newest jet fighters, the Messerschmitt 262 and 163—planes so fast that we couldn't track them with our guns. They hit the squadron in front of us, and we watched one plane after another go down until there was nobody ahead of us.

As we approached the target, anti-aircraft blackened the sky, and then we saw the reason for all the protection: big ships were tied up in the harbor. We had a clear view and could see them trying to separate and scatter.

We hit them hard.

There were times like this when I got caught up in the excitement of the moment and never questioned what I was doing. But I wasn't really happy with the job I had been given. Being a gunner never bothered me, but dropping bombs did. To me the war had a human face. I had begun to feel helpless, suspended in air. I sometimes wondered if I was still alive. I could see images in the clouds, images of faces—my father, mother, sisters, brothers, and people I did not know.

This was happening more and more, and I couldn't explain it—not to myself and certainly not to other people. I was afraid they would think I had gone crazy.



**Clark's medal for thirty-five missions.**

#### **March 14, 1945—Minden**

We had never been on a raid like this before. No anti-aircraft was expected and little chance of fighters because Minden was away from any large towns. Minden was an oil refinery. I say "was" because I don't think anything was left when we got done with it.

#### **March 17, 1945—Böhlen**

Böhlen was another small town that had very little protection. We hit a marshaling yard, and because visibility was clear, we knew we did a good job on it. There was no flak or fighters. This was the kind of mission we liked.

#### **March 19, 1945—Plauen**

A very large town deep in Germany, almost to Czechoslovakia. The mission was fairly routine until after we had dropped the bombs and were heading back to the base. Flak was heavy, and fighters came after us. One of



our engines was out and feathered, and it caught on fire. The pilot put the plane in a dive and tried to put out the fire. We lost sight of the rest of the squadron and had to limp home on our own. We all were frightened. The pilot was having trouble with the controls and told us we might have to bail out. As soon as he said this, I reached around to get my parachute, and the damn thing caught on something, which pulled the rip cord. I nearly panicked. The navigator helped me gather the chute together, but it was all over the nose and so slippery we could hardly control it. Fortunately we didn't have to bail out after all. The white cliffs of Dover were looming on the horizon.

#### **March 21, 1945—Hopsten**

If my remaining missions were as easy as this one, I would never complain. It wasn't a complete milk run, but we all came back together.

#### **March 26, 1945—Plauen**

The town must have been important to rate two missions.

#### **March 30, 1945—Bremen**

We went back to Bremen, where we had had such a bad time on March 11. It was not much different this time either. Jet fighters—ME 262s and 163s—came up to greet us. The planes they hit never had a chance.

#### **April 3, 1945—Kiel**

A long trip into Germany to a submarine base that was well protected with fighters and flak. It was a visual target, and what a view. We saw submarines being built in a production line, and we blew the hell out of them.

#### **April 6, 1945—Leipzig**

Close to Dresden, deep in the heart of Germany, lay Leipzig, a very large town. I'd long since given up counting flak holes, but this time I did and made out over two hundred before I gave it up. I started to sweat after that; I began to count the days, hours, and minutes until I would complete my

thirty-five missions.

Some crew members wanted to fly more than thirty-five; I thought they were insane. I was glad that most of us weren't like that. We certainly didn't look up to them. Asking for more missions was like asking for suicide; they couldn't have given a damn about themselves or anything else.

#### **April 9, 1945**

I cannot remember much about my second-to-last mission except thinking that I had only one more to go.

#### **April 11, 1945—Freiham**

Finally my thirty-fifth mission. Strangely enough, it was also the pilot's. This was simply a coincidence, but I considered it fortunate; I felt the pilot would be extra careful and bring us all back safely.

Little did we know what a terrible mission it would prove to be. Freiham was deep in enemy territory, but at the briefing the target didn't look too bad. There weren't many anti-aircraft guns and hardly any German fighters reported in the area.

En route we lost an engine because of low oil pressure, and we had to feather it. Now we couldn't keep up with the rest of the squadron, and we were losing altitude. The pilot asked us if we wanted to abort the mission. If we did abort, we wouldn't get credit for it and would have to fly another one. I was glad when everyone decided to continue and take our chances.

We watched the squadron above and ahead of us. We had a good view of the target, but the others couldn't see it because they were above the clouds. We saw that their bombs missed. By the time we got there, the clouds had dispersed, and we had a visual run.

We had to fly in low and slow, and because we were alone, all the anti-aircraft fire was directed at us. They hit one of our engines. Now things were really looking grim. I dropped the bombs, and the tail gunner saw them fall. He hooted and hollered

that we had made a direct hit on the marshaling yard that everyone else in the squadron had missed. We all were happy about it, but we began to lose more speed and altitude. The squadron was just barely visible and would soon be out of sight. All we could do was continue on and hope that no fighters came.

The navigator and the pilot decided that Switzerland was the closest landing place, but if we went there, we would be interned for the rest of the war.

Our second-best landing field was just a few miles over the German lines, outside Brussels, Belgium, so we headed there, the plane vibrating like a car with two flat tires but holding together. Finally a P-51 came to give us fighter support; he flew around us like a mother hen. Now we felt we stood a chance. But as we approached the landing strip, our third engine conked out. None of us had ever heard of a B-17 with three engines gone, and we doubted we could stay airborne long enough to land.

As we approached the runway, we saw holes all over the landing strip. But we had run out of choices.

We hit the ground. The pilot tried to miss the holes, but he couldn't. We caught our landing gear on one, and it spun the plane around violently. Then the landing gear buckled, the wing dipped down and parted from the fuselage, and we just kept on going.

When we finally came to a stop, the plane was a complete piece of junk. But we all walked away from it, and any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

After this final mission we assumed we'd be getting passes soon. But no such luck. We were packed off to a rest camp for two weeks. I spent those two weeks half out of my mind. I wasn't used to relaxing.

When my rest period was over, I was sent to a port of debarkation and waited there for a convoy to take me back to the States. We set out on May 6, the day before the war ended. I lay on deck in the sun and played my



harmonica. Nobody bothered me. I didn't make many friends that way, but I didn't care. My head was still spinning from combat and from wondering how I'd managed to survive.

After thirteen days we docked in New York Harbor. I got a thirty-day furlough and arrived home in Wisconsin on May 23. My family was glad to see me and treated me as best they knew how, but I was restless and bored and began to chase after women.

When my furlough was over, I was sent to Portland, Oregon, to fight forest fires caused by the incendiary bombs the Japanese had been sending across the Pacific hung from balloons. There were two hundred of us, most just back from overseas duty. We traveled all over Oregon and Washington in a truck, putting out fires. We had a chow truck and an ambulance, and we slept in tents. Living outdoors all the time made us healthy but wild.

My discharge came through on October 17, my birthday. I thought I couldn't have gotten a better gift.

But everything back home had changed. How could so much be different in just two years? I got into civilian clothes as soon as I could and started looking for a job and something to do with my life. The job I left when I enlisted at eighteen—foreman in a small factory making 40-mm shells for the government—was no longer available, but the plant gave me work cleaning machinery. I was restless and didn't last long. I went back to drinking and chasing after women.

My mother and I ended up renting a place in a very rough neighborhood. It was all we could afford, because I wasn't earning any money. I drank and gambled and in general became a bum.

Most of my old friends had gone into the service about the same time I did. Some never came home, some were badly injured, and some wished they had never come back. I was in there somewhere and tried to figure out where I fit in back home.

So one particularly restless day, September 19, 1946, I re-enlisted in the Air Force. I had been a civilian for eleven months.

I got my stripes back and was sent to Boca Raton, Florida, to learn radar mechanic bombardment in B-29 bombers. At least I was in a warm climate; I hadn't made enough money as a civilian to buy any winter clothes. When I graduated, I got orders to report to Edwards Air Force Base in California, and I headed west with three guys who were going to other bases out there.

Where am I? What happened? What am I doing here? All I could remember was that I had been on my way to Edwards. Instead I had awakened in a

including journalism, and join the glee club at Long Beach College. There was a lot of drinking going on around campus—one thing I was really good at. One day while driving intoxicated, I had a bad accident and nearly got myself killed. I had liked school, the education, the learning. But I screwed up. So I dropped out.

I went back to Wisconsin, to Kenosha. I felt hostility from everyone I met and again began to get the feeling that I wanted to kill everyone on the street. I ended up turning myself in to Downey Veterans Hospital in Illinois. The doctors put me in the lockup ward because I was seeing visions, and they gave me shock treatments. I felt I should

**E**ARLY IN THE MORNING ON MAY 16, 1987, I wrote an open apology to all the cities I had bombed. I wanted it to arrive on Memorial Day.

hospital in Pasadena. How I got there I'll never know.

I was in a room, sitting in a corner, just looking around. I had the feeling of being suspended in the air, and as I looked down, I could see thousands of faces looking up at me.

Five doctors came in to talk to me at the same time. They told me that I was having hallucinations and was reliving my combat days.

I was in the hospital for months. Thoughts of suicide had been with me since the service. Now I had a constant dread that I might start hurting innocent people and end up in prison. I had read stories of people who had gone berserk. I could understand why.

Finally the doctors decided I was not going to harm anyone and gave me a medical discharge. But I really didn't want one; I had nowhere to go. I ended up staying with my sister in California. This gave me some semblance of living, and I gradually got to feel good enough to enroll in classes,

not have come back from the war—that, in fact, I wasn't really anywhere at all.

I don't know how long I was at Downey. At last the hospital discharged me, and I returned to Kenosha and finally found a decent job at Allen A's, a hosiery company. A little later I went to a dance and met Ruth. We hit it off from the start. She was twenty-two and I was twenty-five, and we both were ready to settle down. Within six months, on September 15, 1951, we were married. It was the first time since my enlistment that I was genuinely happy.

But I still couldn't concentrate, and I still felt restless. I kept losing jobs and ending up in veterans' hospitals. It got so bad that we had to move from town to town. I don't know of anyone who has had more jobs than I have through the years. I quit one after another and never knew why.

We lived in Kenosha until 1964, when we moved to Madison. I got a job in the post office. Later we moved to



Poynette, where Ruth and I managed a mobile-home court and owned a small grocery store, and finally to Fort Atkinson, where I bought a tavern for very little money because the owners wanted out. All this time I never talked about the war, not even to Ruth. No one wanted to hear about the war.

In 1981 I started having heart attacks. They forced me to think about my life and my mortality, which so depressed me that I ended up in the hospital with suicidal thoughts and a problem of alcohol abuse. I talked to psychiatrists and stole a peek at my records. Their verdict: schizophrenia. I read up on it and found out it was sometimes incurable. This frightened me further, and I became desperate to understand why I had been hurting my wife and myself. When I asked one of the psychiatrists, he told me that I might have been holding too much inside me for too long and that perhaps I should join a group of other veterans who were having similar problems.

I did, and during one of the meetings I broke down and blurted out things I never thought I'd say. I was so embarrassed afterward that I never returned to that group or those doctors.

But I began thinking more and more about how I wanted to tell my story. I figured by this point I had nothing to lose.

Early in the morning on May 16, 1987, half-asleep, I wrote an open apology to all the cities I had bombed. I wanted the people to know how I felt about what I had had to do during the war. Just writing the letter made me feel better, but it was not intended merely to unburden my conscience. I wanted it to get there on Memorial Day so that the Germans could understand what kind of people Americans are. I requested a response from someone, anyone, just so I'd know my letter had arrived. I never thought anything would come of it. This is what I wrote:

To the People Who Live in [City],  
Germany:

An open apology for having partici-

pated in the bombing of your city on [date].

As we are told as soldiers on either side to perform our duties, it does not mean we cannot feel that part that others must play.

Having participated in thirty-five missions as a gunner and toggler, the thought has always been with me that those on the ground, the innocent and the guilty, were one and the same in war.

Surely now we should understand that men who have malice in their hearts are not to be taken lightly. This is true on this side also. Whatever we do in life we must all be careful not to follow blindly. We must consider that humans are far from perfect and therefore make many mistakes in dealing with one another.

In the month of May in the United States we observe Memorial Day, as I am sure you do in Germany. This should also be the time for forgiveness of past wrongs. Please again accept my heartfelt apology.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Frank Clark

For my own peace of mind, would you have someone reply to my letter."

I had no idea to whom to send the letters. I simply addressed them "To the Public Officials" of each city. I asked my local postmaster whether this would work. He said just to send them and find out.

Seven letters were returned unopened; I must have sent some to East Germany, not realizing the difference.

But then letters from Germany began to arrive. The first ones I received were from Alfons Müller, mayor of Wesseling, and from the office of the minister president of Schleswig-Holstein. Soon they began to arrive not only from city officials but from German citizens all over the country. My letter had been picked up by newspapers across Germany. Here are some of the letters as I first read them.

FROM THE MAYOR OF THE CITY  
OF WESSELING TO MR. FRANK CLARK,  
FT. ATKINSON

June 22, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

I have received your letter of May 16, 1987, and certainly appreciate your concern over the actions you had to take in the war year of 1944.

I was a little boy then and personally experienced the terrible bombings in those war years. Those were sad times, but today I am aware that soldiers on both sides acted on orders. There is cause for forgiveness on both sides, and today we only regret that so many innocent people had to sacrifice life and health in those terrible events in the war.

Based on this realization, we now should act and make sure that there never will be another war. I think this is the best conclusion to be drawn from those terrible events. . . .

I do accept your apology in the name of the citizens of Wesseling, and we have not forgotten what happened in the war—but we have forgiven. Together we should work toward peace. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to visit Wesseling someday. I would be very happy if you could. You would then be our guest.

Yours sincerely,  
Alfons Müller  
(Mayor of Wesseling)

Mayor  
City of Geilenkirchen  
Federal Republic of Germany  
July 16, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

Thank you for your letter in which you address the inhabitants of the city of Geilenkirchen. . . .

May I tell you today that your letter called forth some amount of surprise here but has also left behind an indelible impression.

You express your regret that innocent people died as victims in the bombing of our city and beg our forgiveness as far as you were involved in dropping the bombs.

This is an extraordinary gesture as



well as a praiseworthy gesture. You are apologizing for a happening for which you were in no way responsible and, in the last resort, could not have prevented either. Basically you—as all soldiers—were yourself a victim of that disastrous war. It is all the more to your credit that you are not indifferent to the fate of our citizens and have been dealing with it in your mind to this very day.

We are all called upon to learn from the agonizing past and to draw from it correct conclusions for our own times. If this recognition prevails, then the serious wounds that the war inflicted will not have been in vain. The population of Geilenkirchen, too, experienced a great deal of distress and misery during the war and post-war years. After the evacuation the residents returned to a city that was 72 percent razed to the ground. Most had escaped with only their bare lives. With diligence and ceaseless determination to rebuild, over the following decades success came in removing the outward traces of the war. Grief for the loss of beloved family members, however, is still felt even today.

Every year on the national day of mourning in November we in Germany remember the millions of victims of war and tyranny in a special way. . . .

There is much to indicate that the animosities that shook the world to its very foundations in the first half of our century can be overcome forever if people try to approach each other. Reconciliation among the nations must begin with our own selves. If we are all willing to tread the path of compromise, togetherness, and mutual understanding, we are therewith contributing substantially toward lasting world peace.

Your letter, too, we consider to be this sort of token of goodwill and reconciliation.

For this reason I, as mayor of the city of Geilenkirchen, again wish to thank you most sincerely and trust

that you will get over the disastrous happenings of the war and thus regain your peace of mind.

With kind regards.

Der Chef der Staatskanzlei  
des Landes Schleswig-Holstein  
July 3, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark,  
Minister President Dr. Uwe Barschel has asked me to express to you his warmest appreciation for your letter to the Kiel citizens of May 16, 1987. Dr. Barschel is—as you may know—minister president of Schleswig-Holstein, the land of the Federal Republic of Germany of which Kiel is the capital.

“**A**LLOW ME TO SAY  
that we Germans have to ask  
forgiveness of other peoples.”

I was deeply moved by your letter. I have long considered what to answer you. Let me say these three things:

It was not your country which began the Second World War. It was National Socialist Germany, it was Hitler who chose the way of violence. Millions of innocent people died by his cold and mechanical will to destroy: soldiers and civilians, men, women, and children, who have done nothing but belonging to another nation, worshiping God in a different way, desiring another way of life but tyranny. Even the fate of his own people eventually did not matter to Hitler.

For us the 8th of May 1945 has thus been the end of a going astray in German history. At the same time, there was the seed of hope for a better and more peaceful future in this date of history. This hope became reality. Today the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States of America have an undestroyable common ground. As defender of freedom America was an

enemy of National Socialists in Germany. As the friend of freedom America became a friend of democratic Germany. As a soldier you have contributed in re-establishing freedom in the western part of our country.

You are asking for forgiveness of past wrongs. I do not think that there are any resentments or hostile feelings with people in our country or in this town against those who carried out their duty as soldiers. People have seen and see the raids as events of fate or as rewards of National Socialist hubris. I can understand your personal feeling of responsibility. I do not know your creed. Let me say from the point of view of mine—that it is this remaining



feeling of responsibility, our redeemer died for. **Two of the letters from Germany.**

With all best wishes

Yours faithfully  
Ministerialrat Lambrecht

Der Bürgermeister  
der Stadt Minden  
25 June 1987

Dear Mr. Clark,  
Thank you for your letter from May 16. I received it by the way over the British HQ in our town.

Reading your letter I was deeply impressed and reminded to a lot of actions in the Second World War. . . .

You remember the bombing of Minden at the 14th of March 1945. But this was one of the smaller operation of the Allied Air Force against our town. The most serious air raid was a fortnight later at the 28th of March, and in this action the center of the city was totally damaged—six days before the Canadian parachutists occupied Minden.



But that's history now; we accept your apology as we need forgiveness from the people in other countries. . . .

Yours sincerely  
Röthemeier

Stadt Paderborn  
Der Bürgermeister  
14 July 1987

Dear Mr. Clark,

Thank you very much for your letter dated 26 May 1987. I read it to the council during an open meeting. After the first sentences there was absolute silence in the council chamber.

The local press reported on your letter and printed it. It has met with a positive response both among the citizens and within the town council. . . .

We accept your apology and think about what German soldiers were ordered to do to other nations.

After the attack on 17 Jan. 1945 our town was completely, i.e., 85 percent, destroyed in March.

The population of Paderborn, despite great suffering and destruction, plucked up courage and rebuilt the town. Before 1945 our town had 40,000 inhabitants, and today the figure has risen to 120,000. . . .

Should you have the possibility to come to Germany we would be pleased to see you in Paderborn.

Yours very sincerely  
Herbert Schwiete

Dear Mr. Clark,

I was deeply moved to read your letter in which you ask forgiveness for your participation in the bombing of Dortmund. Not only do I wish to express my own personal thanks but also those of the inhabitants of Dortmund. . . .

I myself—like almost all of those belonging to our generation—was as a young man a member of the armed forces and thus unwillingly drawn into those tragic circumstances.

You can be sure that your letter reached someone who personally understands what you have to say.

"Reconciliation is achieved not by forgetting but by remembering"—this statement was recently uttered by our

head of state, Federal President Richard Weizsäcker.

I believe this is a statement with which we can both concur. I would also like to add that this act of remembering cannot be solely fixed on the past. It must be a remembering that also entails the firm commitment to build a peaceful future with all the peoples of this world—a future of freedom, tolerance, friendship, and harmony. It is a road that our nations have been taking for the past forty years.

That you ask for forgiveness honors you greatly.

Allow me to say in reply that we Germans have to ask forgiveness of other peoples. I am always prepared to do this, and I do it now: I ask forgiveness of you and of the people of the United States of America. . . .

Mr. Clark, you will certainly be interested to learn what has become of Dortmund in recent years. As a sign of our esteem for you, I would like to present you with a book of illustrations about the town of Dortmund today.

Please accept this present as a symbolic expression of the sincere solidarity that the town of Dortmund extends to yourself and the citizens of the United States. As friends and architects of a happier future you are always welcome here.

With sincerest regards and my best wishes

Günter Samtlebe,  
The mayor of the town  
of Dortmund

Paderborn  
July 6, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark,

You must surely be surprised to receive a letter from an unknown German woman in Paderborn.

The reason for writing is that I read in the local about your letter of apology for the bombing attack on Paderborn, on the 17th January 1945.

At that time I was a sixteen-year-old high school girl on my way from school to catch a train to the village where I used to live. Sirens were howl-

ing, and the planes diving to drop the bombs. As I was near to the railway station, I rushed into the nearest house and into the cellar. It was all like a bad dream but was soon over.

I remember coming out after the "all clear" and searching for the right way amongst all the dust and damaged houses and, of course, the screaming people. I was very thankful that my life had been spared.

We don't think of the bad "American" or "British" servicemen. We knew that we were at war and the pilots were doing their duty to their own country. I find it remarkable that after all those years you find time to think about it and send your apologies.

The big attack on Paderborn followed on March 27th and resulted in 95 percent of Paderborn being destroyed.

Forty-two years later we live in a very nice city with modern industry—e.g., Nixdorf Computer. . . .

I am married to an ex-member of the British Army. We have two sons, both engineers, one of whom is married. My husband has worked for the Paderborn Daimler-Benz agents for over twenty-five years, and I am a nurse in one of the Paderborn hospitals.

If ever you came to Germany, especially Paderborn, we would be pleased to show you around.

Yours sincerely  
Margarethe Harrop

Cologne  
July 12, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

. . . Your letter was sent from the city's town hall to the Tourist Office, to my department, where I work as a secretary (English and French). I felt quite touched by your letter and thought I'd like to write to you just as a private person since you have addressed your letter to the people of Cologne. I read in our local paper that you have also written to the mayor of Wesseling, who has already invited you; of course, when you do come, you would visit Cologne as well. . . .

I can assure you that nearly every-



body here is pro-American, and we wouldn't think of the past war when meeting Americans. How dreadful it must have been for you as a young guy when you had to carry out such disastrous orders; as you said in your letter, it was the same on all sides. I was born in that year, in the summer, but came to live in Cologne later, when the war was over. My father, who died ten years ago, was from Cologne and a prisoner of war (of the Americans) in the Rhineland. He always liked Americans. I myself have a seventeen-year-old daughter, born in Cologne, and I think that Americans and the people in Cologne have in common their joyful mentality. . . .

Yours sincerely  
Almut Boumont

Berlin  
July 28, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

. . . I feel deeply impelled to write and assure you that we have nothing to forgive you for. It was war back then—one of the most terrible ever experienced by mankind thus far—and it was unleashed by the Nazi regime.

I, as a German, have often asked myself since then if I bore any share in the guilt for this killing. "No!" I finally told myself as a reply. "You were just a child."—And you, Mr. Clark, as a soldier, were only doing your duty to your country at the time.

When the war broke out, I was nine years old, and fifteen when it ended. During the war and thereafter I lived in Berlin, which is still my hometown even now.

I'd like to give you now a few notations from my war diary. From it you will see what I thought and felt at the time:

"As the bombers drop their destructive load on us, I don't cherish any hate for those up there. I feel only great tension and anxiety and wish this accursed war would finally come to an end."

When the Russian occupying forces left our sector in the summer of 1945

to be replaced by the Americans, I noted in my book:

"We stood along Schlossstrasse watching the Americans march in. The population waved to the soldiers in a friendly way, and I thought, now the war is really over."

I wish you and your family all the best, and peace to us human beings on this earth.

Kind regards,  
Gerda Lemke

Frankenthal/Pfalz  
Federal Republic of Germany  
August 6, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark,

. . . I can assure you, dear Mr. Clark,

W

HEN I READ MR. BREMICKER'S LETTER inviting me to Germany, I didn't think anything would come of it. Then he sent me air tickets.

that in spite of some trouble in Europe concerning anti-American demonstrations, caused by incorrigible scatterbrains, the vast majority of reasonable and influential people in West Germany, belonging to my generation (I was born on January 29, 1933), has friendly and grateful feelings toward the U.S. We certainly don't forget what your country did in favor of us right after 1945—above all, the grand and generous support of Berlin during the dark months of the 1948/1949 blockade by the red Huns—and how you so often stopped the communist monster from trying to realize its sinister sort of appetite. . . .

All the best from your friend  
Franz-Günter Kötter

Osnabrück  
December 15, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

. . . The mayor of Paderborn is bowing his head over your change to apologize, but also reflecting the horrors

committed against many other countries and people by German soldiers.

But was there still any reason to the battle and bombings by soldiers against women, children and old people, for example, the horror attacks against the cities of Lübeck, Köln, Hamburg, and Dresden?

"But" there are always objections: What happened here and there, in Danzig, in Poland?

I repeat the words of your great President Lincoln, "Stand with anybody that stands right, stand with him while he is right and part with him when he goes wrong." . . .

However, my letter ought not to be a dispute about the past. I would like

to tell you that I am glad to hear from the other side, everything done was not always done right. . . .

With friendly greetings  
Werner Eisert

Gerhard Stapf  
Abendzeitung  
Nürnberg  
Federal Republic of Germany  
August 28, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark:

. . . As an editor, born in 1948, your letter affected me deeply. It doesn't happen very often, especially among us in Germany, that someone apologizes to the victims for deeds he has done; too many people would rather hide behind the orders given by their superiors. . . . That's why I find the step you took before the public all the more courageous. I hope that this will make people give thought more often as to how they should be made use of by their governments. This applies just as much for "the kingdom of evil,"



which President Reagan suspects to be located in Moscow, as for the "power lusts of capitalism," which his colleague Gorbachev suspects to be located in Washington. But the beginning must be made, in my opinion, not so much with these two gentlemen as with one's own self and in his immediate surroundings. This is why I consider your letter to be so important. This is why we have also printed it practically in full.

With kind regards,  
Gerhard G. Stapf

July 23, 1987

Dear Mr. Clark/dear Frank,  
... You need the excuse from the people of Paderborn, on one hand; on the other, I think your letter was the best idea which a former bomber crew member could have in trying to bridge possibly still existing mental reserves among our nations. In general, being confronted with their failures, people tend to say: "But the others have done. . . ." Although we Germans practiced awful relations to our neighbors & to many of our own before & during WW2—and you certainly know it—you prefer thinking (or have to think) about what the bombs released from your plane over that small German city had done to those on the ground. Please accept my deep appreciation for your honorable attitude, probably in the name of many other Germans.

I am sure that very many who read your letter will have good thoughts for you, possibly even such people who lost relatives in these bombing raids over Paderborn or other cities in our country.

I do not tend to trust politicians too much in general, but I feel myself in accordance with our *Bundespräsident*, Richard von Weizsäcker, who does, and did, the best for good human relations with his statements, for example in his famous memorial lecture in May 1985. One of his words, in free translation, was: "Those who suppress the [meaning: their bad] past, risk the great danger of a repetition." We hu-

man beings, and particularly we Germans, should always remember what we did to other people.

I know about the awful losses of the USAAF particularly over Germany. . . . I agree with you if you mean that in a war the men in the front line are the least guilty.

Sincerely  
Volker Wilckens

Dear Comrade and Mr. Frank Clark:  
I also was a soldier and had to follow orders in the years from 1939–1945 in good faith for our German Fatherland. . . . During the whole wartime I was only a front soldier with the infantry fighting in France, Russia, Denmark, Italy, and at the end back again in Russia. These were very hard years and life was unbearable for all soldiers. Our wives, mothers and children had to suffer even more back home through these massive bombardments of our cities, people were helpless and without any safety. They burned to death in these firestorms by the thousands, many were buried alive in tumbling houses and walls.

On one of my trips in July 1943 from Denmark to Braunschweig we passed the heavily bombed and burning city of Hamburg. I was deeply shocked. And it was done only to destroy the morale and faith of the German people. What must you have felt, dear Frank, as flier about these bombardments, knowing there were no military installations, only living quarters for women, mothers, children, and senior citizens which could not defend themselves. The only thing they had in that year of 1943 was their belief to their Germany, and is why these cities were bombed and demoralized even in 1944 when the end was near and there was no more resistance. A few days before war's end bombs still fell and farmers in the fields and railroad trains loaded with people were killed by machine guns of hunting airplanes. I do not consider that as war. . . .

It must have been fun to exercise such flying art. German people are still blamed as of today for cruelty com-

mitted against Jewish people, unfortunately yes, and this unforgettable spot in history we will carry this burden forever. . . .

Today we live again in fear. Germany a great cultural and honest hard-working peace-loving people and proud nation broken off and torn (Yalta treaty). I believe someday in the future honest history will be written and many accusations have to be corrected and make up to Germany. . . .

July 27, 1987  
Ed. Scharwächter  
GMBH & Co. KG  
Geschäftsleitung

Dear Mr. Clark:  
In Germany you got known as "Pilot for Peace."

The newspapers published your letter to the mayor of the city of Paderborn, Mr. Schwiete, and we could feel a sigh going through all of our nation, knowing there is a like-minded person, realizing that war is the continuation of a wrong policy. . . .

And as you put it so right, the guilty and unguilty are always the same and soldiers on both sides always fulfill their duties and you feel that on the other side there are humans too, only with a different uniform.

And here we feel very much the same as you, and we anticipate without knowing you that in behavior and thinking you are a true American, someone we hold in high esteem and whom we love.

Someone striving for peace can expect peace; only those who step in for peace will be accepted in heaven.

We are not the ones to point to heaven, yet we know that pure ideas always come from there.

As you intend to visit Paderborn, we would very much like to invite you to Remscheid.

As bureaucracy is not always fast to respond, we, however, as a supplier to the automotive industry, much as our product, can react much quicker, and thus would like to help you in financing your tour.

Please write us about what you in-



tend to do in the future so that we are able to react accordingly.

We send you all our best wishes and remain

Yours sincerely,  
Richard Bremicker sen.

When I read Mr. Bremicker's letter, I didn't think anything would ever come of his invitation. Ruth and I had little money for necessities, let alone a trip to Germany. But Mr. Bremicker continued to invite me. Finally he sent

with the first time!

After we left the plane, we heard over the loudspeaker, in English, "Mr. and Mrs. Frank Clark, you have a driver waiting for you at the main entrance." We had wondered all across the Atlantic how we were going to get to Remscheid by ourselves.

At the entrance a young man took our luggage and led us to a big black Mercedes limousine. Amazed, we climbed in, and we were off on the autobahn at well over one hundred

interested in meeting with some of the people in other towns who had written me letters, he put his interpreter at our disposal, and we were able to reach several of them.

During one conversation I mentioned feeling particularly bad about having bombed the college town of Paderborn, a city with no military targets. Bremicker said Paderborn was too far to drive, and without missing a beat, he hired a helicopter to fly us there. Bremicker and his wife,

along with our interpreter, accompanied us. We met the *Bürgermeister*, who had his assistant show us the beautifully restored town. I enjoyed this particular visit immensely, for in my imagination I had feared Paderborn would look much different.

In my eyes, Bremicker is a living symbol of the good people can do for each other. He set up a roundtable discussion with the press about my visit, which culminated in various articles in the local papers. I am convinced that everything he did, he did with the hope of furthering peace among his fellow human beings and among countries.

And still the letters kept coming. Some were highly

emotional, loving, and heartfelt; others, equally heartfelt, were mean and accusing. But an odd thing had happened to me. The understanding letters, which far outnumbered the others, had brought me peace. Vicious letters that might once have sent me into deep depression now merely rolled over me. I realized for the first time the whole world didn't need to forgive me. I could finally forgive myself. ★

*We are sorry to report that Frank Clark died during the preparation of this article. He had wished to thank Kathy A. Johnson for her help in preparing the initial manuscript, which he called Pilot for Peace.*



**The Bremickers and an interpreter get ready to set off for Paderborn with Frank and Ruth Clark.**

a pair of air tickets.

I had saved some money and had vacation time coming. I felt this might be my last opportunity, as I feared my time left on earth was limited. My wife had never flown, and I had never flown in a jet.

We disembarked from the American Airlines plane in Düsseldorf, Germany, after making a stop in Frankfurt, less than nine hours after leaving Chicago. My first flight across the Atlantic, to England, had taken thirteen hours in a new B-17.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have seen myself returning after forty-four years to see and talk to the people of Germany. What a contrast

miles per hour. When we arrived in Remscheid, our driver took us to the best hotel in town, where we were shown to a beautiful room on the fifth floor overlooking the city.

We had not been there five minutes when Richard Bremicker burst into the room. Though he and I had only corresponded, we embraced as if we had known each other all our lives.

After a short visit he told us that his driver would pick us up at noon. We visited his beautiful home and then his factory, where seventeen hundred employees were manufacturing parts, mostly door hinges, for the automotive industry all over the world.

When our host learned that I was